

The Influence of Lincoln's Mothers

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A child's identity at an early age is soon influenced by the parent's actions, beliefs and character. The first and most influential women in Abraham Lincoln's life were his birthmother, Nancy, and his beloved stepmother, Sarah. Twenty-eight-year old Thomas Lincoln and the daughter of Lucy (or "Lucey" as it is spelled in the old records) Hanks, Nancy Hanks were married. On February 12, 1809, Nancy gave birth to Abraham Lincoln. After she died in 1818, Thomas married Sarah Bush Johnston. Abraham knew Nancy for only nine years. Abraham started a new life and spent the rest of his childhood in Indiana with his new loving mother.

Abraham did not care to talk about his birthmother Nancy. This was due to the fact that Nancy was said to be an illegitimate child. Nancy's mother had no wedding certificate and this left room for speculation about Lincoln's grandmother. In one legal case the matter of his mother was relevant to Abraham. The case involved the questioning of hereditary traits and Abraham observed that illegitimate children were "oftentimes sturdier and brighter than those born in lawful wedlock." To prove his point he mentioned his mother Nancy in court when he said she was "the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks and a well-bred Virginia farmer or planter." From "this broad-minded, unknown Virginian" Abraham believed he inherited the persona that distinguished him from the other members of his family: ambition, mental alertness, and the power of analysis.

Few of Abraham's earliest memories concerned his mother. Photography was far in the future and no one bothered to draw a likeness of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. She is said to have been brilliant, for she was one of the very few literate frontier women. Although she was considered brilliant, she lacked writing skill and had to sign legal documents with an "X." On rare occasions in Abraham's older life, he referred to her as his "angel mother," due to her loving affection. As one of Abraham's dear friends, Herndon reports Abraham saying "God bless my mother; all that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her." According to historian David Herbert Donald, it was an honor not so much to her maternal care as to the genes that she purportedly supplied from his unnamed grandfather. Abraham was nine when his birthmother Nancy died. Her death left a fog of depression on the Lincoln household.

A year after Nancy's death, Thomas Lincoln realized that he and his family could not go on any longer alone. Thomas headed back to Kentucky to see Sarah Bush Johnston, who was the widow of the Hardin County jailer and mother of three small children. He needed a wife; she needed a husband; so they made a quick businesslike arrangement for him to pay her debts and her to pack up her belongings and move to Indiana with him. The arrival of Sarah Lincoln marked a turning point in Abraham Lincoln's life. Sarah's children Elizabeth, John and Matilda, who ranged from thirteen to eight years old, brought life and excitement into the depressed Lincoln household. Among the spinning wheel, the walnut bureau, and spoons, the greatest thing she brought was love. Sarah soon set to work on the unhygienic house and family. "She soaped—rubbed and washed the children clean," Dennis Hanks remembered, "so that they look[ed] pretty neat—well and clean."

The fusing of two separate families seemed near impossible, but was rendered possible by Sarah Lincoln. Without jealousy or mayhem, she formed one solid and clean household. She treated Thomas's children as if she were their very own birthmother. She grew especially fond of Abraham. "Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested him," she remembered. "I never gave him a cross word in all my life. . . His mind and mine—what little I had [—] seemed to move together—move in the same channel." Many years later, when Sarah was attempting to compare her son and her stepson, she told an interviewer: "Both were good boys, but I must say—both now being dead that Abe was the best boy I saw or ever expect to see." Abraham loved his new mother and never spoke of her except in the most affectionate terms. The years of Sarah Bush Lincoln's arrival in Indiana were happy ones for young Abraham. Afterward, when Abraham spoke of this time, it was as "a joyous, happy boyhood," which he described "with mirth and glee," and in his recollections "there was nothing sad nor pinched, and nothing of want."

Both Nancy and Sarah were colossal influences on young Abraham. The love of both of his mothers helped shape his career and life choices. Abraham credited Nancy with grand traits such as ambition, mental alertness, and the power of analysis. These traits became crucial during his time as the President of the United States. The love provided by his stepmother Sarah during a time of loss and the constant motivation to excel in school and all other aspects of life prepared Abraham to make wise choices as well as make productive use of his time. At the time that Abraham became president he told of the encouragement Sarah gave him as a boy. "She had been his best friend in this world," a relative reported him as saying "and . . . no man could love a mother more than

he loved her.” [From Charles Coleman, *Abraham Lincoln and Coles Country, Illinois*; David Donald, *Lincoln*; Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*; and Allen Rice, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*.]